

Encountering God in Prayer

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At half-past four in the morning, the little neighborhood in Kolkata resounds with chirps of birds, radio music, and early voices of shopkeepers, vegetable vendors, paperboys, school kids, and a miscellany of others rolling into their day. Dominating these are the sounds of bells and sacred chants (*mantras*) from a nearby Temple, a Prayer Call (*adhan*) by a muezzin from a Mosque nearby, and hymns from Christian homes around. Religion, certainly, is an interwoven fiber of our society. Prayer is its distinctive feature.

From homes and neighborhoods to schools, universities, and working places; from market places to river banks, vales, and mountain tops, we are incessantly surrounded by sights, symbols, and sounds of prayer. The experiences are varied; the commodities, not few. We, of course, talk of flowers, incense sticks, coconuts, and nectar; we also know a bit about prayer wheels, prayer mats, prayer shawls, and prayer books; not to mention, oils, waters, and herbs; shrines, shuls, and sanctuaries. Somehow, deep within the human heart lies a distinct connection, one that reaches out from the abysmal within and plunges into the transcendent infinite-yet-at-hand that we know is God; the reaching out suffused with breaths of sincere prayer and sustained by the force of faith. Even the early Greeks had an altar "To The Unknown God" (*Agnosto Theo*), in case there was One who was

not addressed among the myriads of deities that they knew and worshipped¹, and the Indians had this aphorism by Kabir "He is remembered by all in sorrow; in pleasure, by none: why would there be any sorrow, if He were remembered in pleasure by one,"² thereby declaring that memory of God must not be merely limited to the temporality of need but must pervade our entire experience of being. However, Kabir belongs to the post-Islamic era, when monotheism and the way of personal devotion had found some place in the Indian mind instigating reflective



local movements such as the Bhakti panth and Sikhism.³ The gap between the fearful

¹ Acts 17:23. Don Richardson in *Eternity in Their Hearts* (California: Regal Books, 1984), explains the Acts 17 episode against the historical background of how this God who was unknown to the Athenians was sought through this altar by the ancient Greeks. This Unknown God, it is said, was thought to be responsible for a seemingly retributory plague that was consuming Athens, and His appeasement through the intervention of a Cretan Prophet Epimenides who erected this altar and propitiated this God through a sacrifice, is said to have warded off the plague.

² Author's rendering of "Dukh mein sumiran sab karein, sukh mein karein na koye; jo sukh mein sumiran karein toh dukh kahe ko hoye".

³ It might be a coincidence, but it might also be an instance of trans-cultural influence that the following lines by Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai (dated around 1050

appeasement of “The Unknown God” and the culture of devotional self-surrender is bridged by the revelation of an important aspect constituting the approach of God: it is what we will call as the rediscovery of prayer, something that was, was not, is, and still is not, and must constitute, with all its pillars and strings intact, the fundamental of the approach of God – a bridge that spans within the exclusive revelation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of man.

The Bridge

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus”
(1Tim.2:5, NKJV).

The Bible teaches us the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. We have direct access to God. However, this directness of access is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, past all religious boundaries. He is God, He is Man; He is the Bridge between God and man.

We have sufficient reasons now to believe that the foundations of religion are not animistic but theistic. In fact, several anthropological studies justify the Biblical view that animism and polytheism are

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not primal but degenerated forms of the first spiritual experience.⁴ There is no significance to theorizing that the sense and fear of the unknown and the numinous engendered the cult of prayer, except for the evolutionary underpinning of some chronological frameworks – which is irrelevant and unnecessary for a rational understanding of nature in general and specific, and has been discussed at length by experts in the various fields in works elsewhere. That being said, we must now plunge into enquiring the foundations of prayer from a Biblical vantage point.

The distinctive teaching of Christianity is that the universe was created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*); therefore, it has no fundamental standing; it is contingent. The building blocks of this universe are made of the substance called as void, zero, cipher, or *shunya* – for, the world is basically made out of emptiness. However, it is not nothing; though, in itself and by itself it is engrossed with the sense of abstract-yet-personal rootlessness and voidness that produce anxiety or vanity as manifest in the consciousness of sentient beings. Neither reason (which is devoid of concrete elements) nor experience (which

is devoid of the ground of necessity) can rescue man from his fallenness⁵ which may be described as the condition of self-zeroing. The only rescue is God, who gives us shape

AD) are almost identically reflected in an aphorism by Kabir some 500 years later: “Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made; Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quill, And ev’ry man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God above Would drain the ocean dry; Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky.” Kabir said, *Saat samund masi karun, Lekhani sab banraye. Dharti sab kagad karun, Hari gun likha na jaye* (Were I to make of the seven seas all ink, And of every stalk of forest a quill; Were I to turn the whole earth into paper; Yet, this would not suffice writing the virtues of God).

⁴ Ref. Romans 1:18-25, Cf. Don Richardson in *Eternity in Their Hearts*, pp.74-77 and Robert Brow, “Origins of Religion”, *The World’s Religions* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1988), pp. 30-33.

⁵ Cf. Domenic Marbaniang, *Epistemics of Divine Reality: An Argument for Rational Fideism*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (Bangalore: Asian Institute of Theology, 2007).

and purpose by the Word of His power (Heb. 1:3) that brought this world into existence (Heb. 11:3). Throughout the Bible recurs the truth that it is not the human longing as much as is the divine calling that functions as the primary motivation for all recourse to faith. God desires and calls us to seek Him, therefore prayer exists.

One may, however, ask whether prayer existed before the Fall. Indubitably, yes; for, prayer being a seeking of God's will, permission, or action regarding any given subject, is prior to and unrelated to the Fall. A clear evidence of this fact is that the Lord Jesus Christ prayed, in fact, more than any other man on earth; yet, He was untouched by the fallenness of man. Therefore, it would not be right to say that prayer originated after the Fall. Whether the Fall existed or not, prayer would exist as the bond that linked our contingent and finite worlds to the eternal purposes and resources of God. The bridge, essentially, is Christ who is the only One Mediator between God and man. Every other way is redundant and terminal.

Yoga versus Prayer

The *sanyasa* sat serene, undisturbed, unattached, and tranquil. Prince Siddhartha was intrigued by this sight. He resolved to don the saffron robes and walked out of his luxurious palace into the dark and violent night of this world in search for the light. Years later, someone asked him who he was. He had been in contemplation under a tree, and he replied, "I am Buddha (the enlightened one)".

It is a known fact that the philosophy of Yoga, though springing from Samkhya, has considerable roots in Buddhist philosophy (as well as in Jain philosophy). A comparative perusal of the *Yoga Sutras* would provide sufficient proof of this. One significant

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component of both these systems is a stress on the contemplative life, stretching this further onto fixture of mind on nothingness or emptiness (*shunya*). Drawing from this principle, Abhishiktananda (originally, Henri le Saux; died 1973), a French Benedictine monk in India, had elaborated much on what he termed "the prayer of silence" that he judged could be invaluable aided by yogic exercises.⁶ For him, the quest of yoga (comprising the various methods or techniques) is spurred by the intense drawing towards the prayer of silence. In his words, "Genuine yoga is essentially a method, having both an inward and an outward aspect, whose aim is to bring the mind to total silence."⁷ He quotes the first aphorism of Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* that sums up the essence of true yoga as "the arresting of all mental activity."⁸ For Abhishiktananda, "there can no more be a "Christian" yoga than there could be Christian logic or Christian gymnastics"; on the other hand, "Genuine yoga aims at stopping the formation of concepts and

⁶ Abhishiktananda, *Prayer* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1967, 1993), p.77

⁷ *Ibid*, p.68

⁸ *Ibid*, p.69. The original *sutra* is "*yogashchittavrittinirodhah*" (*yoga-chitta* (consciousness)-*vritti* (taking forms, modifications, patterning)-*nirodhah* (cessation, restraining). Interestingly, in Modern Medical Science, death is defined as "the irreversible cessation of brain activity"; no doubt, Swami Vivekananda, in his introduction to the *Yoga Sutras* had to explain why both the ends of the light spectrum are as dark as each other, though qualitatively different – the final end of yoga is *Samadhi* (transcendental consciousness): *samadhi* also means sepulcher.

immobilizing the mental flux, so that every image or thought may disappear, whether Hindu, Buddhist or Christian.”⁹ Having said this, he explores the value of the experience of emptiness in Christian experience of prayer as the spring of self-awareness and, ultimately, divine awareness. His logic is simple: until one reaches the point of union with God in consciousness, one has not understood or known God, one has not been enlightened by the Spirit, one has not received the highest of the gifts of the Spirit, which is the gift of Wisdom, by which “the Spirit acts at that central point of the soul where it is nothing but pure awakening to the self, pure awareness of being, beyond all that is perceived or thought.”¹⁰ In view of all this, he says, Christians are bound by the obligation to develop their mind’s capacity for silence and to hold themselves in a state of constant wakefulness, waiting upon the Spirit. When the processes of the mind are stilled and the mind emptied of all its volatile content, then out of that abyss arises, according to him, some inner power or light that breaks in the awakening.¹¹ The theological rationale of all this must be quoted in Abhishiktananda’s own words to retain its flow of argument:

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The Christian who is seeking for true prayer cannot be indifferent to all this. Any prayer which, even unconsciously, regards God as an object is not a prayer “in spirit and in truth”. God cannot be an *object*, because by definition an object depends on a *subject*, who sets it before himself (*ob-jicit*) so as to be able to look at it or deal with it, and so makes of it a *thou* or a *he*, if not an *it*. We cannot rightly speak of God in the third person, despite the exigencies of

grammatical or linguistic convention. God comes *first*. *I* am only myself in the *thou* which God addresses to me. God alone is the first person, in the proper sense of the term, for he is the fount of all discourse.... To be absolutely true, the *Thou* of my prayer should be grounded in the *Thou* which the Son eternally addresses to the Father, in the indivisible I-Thou of the One-in-Three.

So long as in our prayer we continue to think and feel, to treat God “in relation to ourselves”, it is certain that we have not yet entered the innermost “mansion” of the Interior Castle – according to the imagery of St Teresa of Avila. Those whose aim is God never stop short at anything whatever that is thought or felt, no matter how exalted or uplifting it may seem to be. God is beyond.... [The spirit] is for ever incapable of reaching him [God], so long

as it is not ready to leave itself behind and to be immersed and lost in the abyss of God himself. Then only it understands that silence is the highest and truest praise: *Silentium tibi laus* [in footnote, “Praise for

you is silence”, based on the Hebrew text of Ps.65:1 (cp.62:1)]. The soul itself is then simply silence, a silence to which it has been brought by recollecting itself deep within and by stilling its inner activity; but now a silence which the Spirit makes to resound with the eternal Word, a silence that is all expectation, gazing at the One who is there, pure waiting, an awakening...¹²

The philosophical foundation of such emerging theology is marked by at least four incongruities:

1. *Mystic Blundering*. The aim of this theology is the ascetic mystic experience. However, since mysticism is not explicitly (or even

⁹ *Ibid*, p.72

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.80

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.73

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 80-82

implicitly) taught in the Bible, the recourse has been to the closest philosophy that upheld it with some misinterpretation of Scripture and adducing of tradition.

2. *Ambitious Void*. In Buddhist yoga, the experience of emptiness is considered to be the end of all dialectics (ideas, experiences and actions) and the attainment of *Nirvana* (emptiness),¹³ which is Buddhahood (Enlightenment); similarly, in *Maitri Upanisad*, the highest state of Brahman (non-dual Self) is "the state of unqualified understanding (unqualified consciousness) where the mind is completely dissolved without any trace of the concept of space, time, sound, breath, or any

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object."¹⁴ The state of the highest consciousness is identified with the cessation of the sound at the end of the chanting of OM – the end of the chant, the non-sound at the end, Brahman (self) is silence – and that is the goal of yoga, the cessation of all *chittavritti*. This view is totally in opposition to the Biblical view of Jesus Christ as the Divine *Logos*, the Word, Wisdom, Reason, and

Revelation of God as person.¹⁵ Contingency is abhorrent to yoga; therefore, the physical ambition aims at invincibility, while the psychical ambition aims at transcendence – both, reflective of Edenic Fall caused by the desire to be like God. It is obvious, that Abhishiktananda disregards this fundamental difference in thinking of yogic practices as aids to Christian experience of prayer,¹⁶ while also accepting that emptiness should not be the goal.

3. *End of Reason*. The Bible nowhere recommends the kind of silence that yogis talk about. The emptiness of OM is set in opposition against the intense logical and spiritual depths of the Laws of God that the Bible calls us to meditate upon. When the Bible calls us to call upon the Name of the Lord, it doesn't refer to chanting, as is the common practice of the *mantric* religions. Intelligence is an important feature of Christian worship and prayer. Paul says, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the intellect also" (1Cor.14:15, ACV). The silence of waiting is not a blank voidness of mind akin to *samadhi*; it is reverent anticipation before the Lord, and never lasts very long.

4. *Fall of Prayer*. The vision of submerging in the nebulous consciousness of God without subject-object distinctions may have mystic attractions; but, it has certain philosophical assumptions that must be seriously countered at the outset. Yoga views the soul to be an individuated manifestation of the universal force reduced to its particular form through stress raised in the universal consciousness. Man as a genus is considered to be the result

¹³ Cp "When discursive ideas have disappeared, discrimination comes to rest, and with it all karma and defilement, and all kinds of rebirth. Hence one calls emptiness *Nirvana*, as it brings to rest (*nirvritti*) all discursive ideas." *Buddhist Texts*, Trans. & ed. By E. Conze etc, as cited by O.N. Krishnan, *In Search of Reality* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004), p. 288

¹⁴ O.N. Krishnan, *In Search of Reality*, p. 113

¹⁵ The Bible doesn't teach about a *nirguna* (formless, attributeless) God. God is *saguna* (possessing attributes).

¹⁶ This is at point in his statement "The marvellous powers attributed to yogis are no more extraordinary than the miracles performed by the saints", *Prayer*, p. 77

of the differentiation of the whole into an infinite plurality of correlated centers called individuals, effects of nature.¹⁷ As such, the relationship between the particular consciousness and the universal one is akin to that between air in the atmosphere and air in our lungs. Therefore, in Yoga, there is no prayer: there are only techniques towards self-realization;¹⁸ yogic exercises are meant to excite and awaken the latent, inner powers; as such there can be no compatibility between yogic meditation and Biblical contemplation.

Contrary to the yogic world, contingency plays an important role in the prayer-favoring framework; for, it not only distinguishes God from man in essence, but also positions man in the state of urgency and need; God never prays to man, but man is expected to pray to God. This is absent in both polytheistic and monist religions, where any individual has potential to acquire supreme status. Regarding yoga as physical exercises, chiefly what Surendranath Dasgupta¹⁹ has referred to as “the science of breath” and its developed form of *pranayama* (“a system of breath control”), the value of the techniques depends on, first, the theological validity of the system (since yoga

has been adopted by several systems, ascetic, occultic, etc)²⁰ that gives them meaning – and there can be no meaning without a reference frame, then on the purpose or end pursued that defines their virtue.

Eternal Priesthood

The significance of Christ's Incarnation is paramount to an understanding of the possibility and effectualness of prayer. His eternal and mediatory priesthood is the ultimate foundation of prayer. Therefore, the New Testament prescribes all prayer to be

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done in the Name of Jesus Christ (Jn.14:13,14; 16:23,24,26). The essence of this truth is captured in the declaration of Christ Himself: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn.14:6). This understanding is important since the statement is trans-temporal, it applies to both Pre-Fall and Post-Fall situations alike. There was never that Christ was not the way. He did not become the way. He eternally exists as the

way, the truth, and the life – the eternal “I am”, immutable and absolute. Through Him were the worlds created, and for Him (Col.1:15). All things begin in Him and return to Him, who is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End (Rev.1:11), in Him will the worlds merge and consummate (Eph.1:10) – the segregate, aggregating into eternal damnation and infernal death.²¹ This

¹⁷ Theos Bernard, *Hindu Philosophy* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2003), p. 109

¹⁸ Yoga does have place for a belief in God, contrary to the atheistic stance of Samkhya. However, the God of Yoga is like the Demiurge of Plato; he acts as the impetus of the evolution of *prakriti* (the material aspect of the world) while also thought as helping his devotees find release from empirical bondages through their practice of yoga. See M. Hiriyanna, *Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), pp. 282-283

¹⁹ *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I. (Cambridge, 1922), p.227. Project Gutenberg [EBook #12956], Release Date, July 20, 2004. Gutenberg.net

²⁰ R. R. Maharaj records horrific and painful, demonizing effects of yoga in his autobiography *Death of a Guru*, R. R. Maharaj with Dave Hunt (NY: A. J. Holman Company, 1977)

²¹ Notice it doesn't say “which are under the earth”, but only “which are in heaven, and which are on earth in Him”, thereby excluding all things that are separate from Him forever

exclusivity will explain why prayers by any person or group throughout history (past, present, future), irrespective of creed or culture, are either answered or rejected: the criterion is whether the prayer responds in answer to the work of the Spirit of Christ or not. Everything else is fleshly and transgressional. The prayer in spirit and in truth can only be such as responds to the Spirit of grace (which is of Christ – Jn.1:17; Heb.10:29) striving with, testifying to, and drawing one to the Father; for the Spirit also intercedes for us (Gen.6:3; 1Pet.3:18-20; Jn.12:32; 17:8-10; 1Cor.12:3; Heb.3:7; 4:2; 1Cor.10:4; 1Pet.1:11; Rom.8:26). That was the reason why Cain's sacrifice was rejected while Abel's was accepted. Cain's was not patterned after the law of faith of the revelation of the Spirit of Christ (Heb.11:4; Gen.4:7). John says that Cain's works were evil while his brother's were righteous (1Jn.3:12), which means that it was not the works in themselves but the disposition of faith by which they were performed that established them as righteous or evil – Abel was, therefore, justified and declared righteous (Heb.11:4) – all this connects with the Biblical aphorisms in James: "the prayer of faith shall save the sick" and "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas.5:15,16). Christ alone is the eternal source and end of all saving faith; for He alone is the essential revelation of God – He is the way, the truth, and the life (Heb.12:2; Rev.22:12-14,17-20).

In the Incarnation and Passion of Christ the chasm between the eternal and the temporal qualities of being or existence is infinitely and immutably bridged²² forever. However, it must be understood that the two were never poles – never polarized. The eternal quality has no rival pole and so is itself not a pole: it spans infinity. The eternal, in fact, contains the temporal in the sense of the Cretan

aphorism "In Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28), meaning that the both are not two distinctly equivalent and individual ends; only the eternal is self-contained, temporality is contained in and relative to it, though infinitely distinct from it: this infinite distinctive constitutes the chasm we talked about. They are different, but they are not poles – this is the difference. The dualism is not dialectical (as in Taoism or Process philosophy); for that would circumscribe each and eternity would be an impossible category. The dualism is only relative, as between the necessary and the contingent. The world is contingent upon God. In the Incarnation, then, eternity and temporality are bridged in the sense that the



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contingent world is embraced in the being of Christ, the Son of God, in an essential connection – He became Man; yet the nature of the contingent and the nature of the absolute are unmixed in His person. This, says the writer of Hebrews, qualifies Christ for His everlasting and immutable priesthood. Now, there are two everlasting orders of Biblical priesthood established by God; the first is Melchizedekian (Ps.110:4; Gen.14:18, 20; Heb.5:6; 6:20; 7:21), established by divine oath, and the second is Aaronic (Exod.40:15; Num.25:13), established by divine covenant. The Melchizedekian order is general and eternal, whereas the Aaronic order is national and temporal; the Melchizedekian order has no origins in time nor geographical or cultural

²² The Latin word for "priest" is *pontifex* and means "bridge builder" – incorrectly applied to the Pope as *Pontifex Maximus*, meaning the High Priest.

specifications while Aaronic priesthood had such. Some understand Melchizedek to be a Christophany of the Old Testament. This is a plausible conjecture seeing that only one High Priest is ever mentioned in that order and the Hebrew word *dibrah* for "order" used in Psalm 110:4 may also mean "word", as

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indicated by John Gill, or be taken as *dabar*, meaning "word" (without the later scribal additions of vowels), as a Messianic Jewish pastor had once indicated, interpreting the text to say "Upon My word, O Melchizedek, You are a priest forever" in the eternal establishment (notice it affirms "You are", not "You shall be")— thus, showing that the Melchizedek addressed here is Christ Himself.²³ Also, if the order is established by God rather than being merely recognized by Him as such, then the history of the establishment could only first be seen in Psalm 110:4, which was spoken with regard to Christ in eternity. Scripturally, the eternal priesthood belongs to Christ alone, which is neither continued nor taken from anyone but is exclusively His eternally; therefore, He is also called the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev.13:8), and in light of this can be understood all those prophetic scriptures that signify the sufferings

of Christ, even as it is said regarding the prophets, "the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1Pet.1:11): all this pointing to the fact of how eternity and temporality are summed up in the core of Christ's incarnate being; therefore, His one offering annuls infinite condemnation once for all, and the effects of His atonement apply trans-historically to both the Old and the New Testament believers alike. This explains also why and how prayers in the general order (apart from the Law) are accepted before God without any demand of sacrifice for sins, because the Way is eternally rent open in the sacrifice of His flesh, being available to all who approach God in brokenness and faith. The historical manifestation of Christ in flesh, consequently, constitutes the mystery of God's will regarding man – which is, godliness (1Pet.1:20; 1Tim.3:16). To sum this up, the eternal priesthood of Christ is the foundation of the possibility and expectancy of prayer. It is only in Him (relation), by Him (foundation), through Him (mediation), and for Him (intention) that all prayer has any meaning; we are only accepted in Him (Eph.1:6; Heb.10:19,20). This is the mystery of eternal godliness.

The Altar

"Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne" (Rev.8:3, NKJV).

The Bible is a book of altars; it is a book of prayers. The first altar was built by God and He never needed a second one; the earthly were mere copies and shadows of the eternal (Rev.13:8; 1Pet.1:20;²⁴ Gen.3:21; Ex.25:6;

²³ In one of the few *Tishrei Journals*, published in India by Maranatha Revival Crusade, Secunderabad, in the 90s

²⁴ The word *proginosko* for "foreordained", used in this verse, actually means "known before hand".

The only alternative for divine revelation is idolatry; all else is unlivable. Even Heidegger's "authentic existence" is a godless idolatry of the self-invented, self-determined, self-defined self: in Biblical terms, it is mere chasing of the wind.

Heb.8:5), yet they do give an insight into the meaning of the divinely instituted one.

One of the Greek words used for "service" in the New Testament is *latreia* and it refers to Temple service (Heb.9:1,6). It, along with its verb form *latreuo*, is also the word used in connection with the ministry or service of a Christian (Rom.12:1; Mat.4:10; Acts 27:23; Rom.1:9; Heb.12:28). Another word *leitourgos*, along with its verb form *leitourgeo*, is also a Temple word used for Christian service, especially public (Acts 13:2; Rom.15:16,27); it is the word from which is derived the term "liturgy". The two symbols that are primarily important in the understanding of Christian ministry in the New Testament are the altar (associated with the Temple ministry) and the scepter (associated with the Kingdom ministry). The Temple and the Kingdom are not two distinct ministrations; they are one, bound up in the very life and work of Jesus Christ. He is the High Priest and the King.

The essence of this is captured in Hebrews 1:3-8 where it says:

Who..., when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; Being made so much better than the angels, as He hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee? ...But unto the Son He saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom.

The tying principle is "righteousness", which is the eschatological concern (*teleos*) of history centered in Christ (2Pet.3:13). Therefore, the

two symbols, altar and scepter, closely represent all that Christ means to us and how we relate to Him in every facet of our life (Matt.3:15; 1Cor.1:30; 15:34; 2Cor.3:9; 6:14; Phil.1:10,11). Any ministry (or service) that is devoid of the righteousness of Christ's altar and scepter in any and every aspect is unknown, untouched, and unrelated to Him (Mat.7:22; 2Cor.9:10; 2Tim.4:8). This inevitably applies also to the ministry of prayer.²⁵ The Scripture severally declares that the Lord's ears are shut to the prayers of the wicked, but are open to the prayers of the righteous (Ps.66:18; Isa.1:15; 59:2; Pro.15:29; Jas.5:16); the altar, meanwhile, indicating that the righteousness is by grace (divine initiative) and faith (human response) and never sourced of a contingent being.²⁶

The question is why does one pray and what is the rationale for approaching a righteous and just God for any reason whatsoever. "Need" is an important term. But the drive to the True God is not at all need; the drive does not exist. Drives and needs, whatsoever, only invent their own gods. A spirituality based on such is totally idolatrous; it is false (Rom.1:18-32; 1Cor.10:6-10; Gal.5:16-21). There are some metaphysical experiences, however, that are such that act as preparatory ground for the possibility of God's revelation for the subject. These are experiences such as void, anxiety, boredom, rootlessness, and bewilderment. The most poignant of these is anxiety (*Angst*), which Heidegger posited as

²⁵ In Acts 13:2, prayer is referred to as a ministry (*leitourgeo*) to God.

²⁶ The tragedy of the Fall was that man chose to have the merit of the good and evil on his own prowess, thus violating the principle of eternal righteousness that exclusively and essentially is of God.

essentially defining Being-toward-death; for in anxiety does the reflective self “find itself *faced* with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence.”²⁷ Anxiety is an intense and existentially quivering fear of the unknown, of the blocked void. As such, it is not even a drive toward anything positive, far be it God. It, essentially, is a reaction in face of contingent termination, of nothingness. Similarly, do the other conditions not function as turners to God; but, they certainly are experiences that can only be met through a revelation of and faith in the True God.²⁸ Fluxed with atheism and agnosticism, such *Angst* only engenders madness, unless it is avoided by recourse to the self-invention of or subscription to a world-view or a virtual-gaming-world (Stoic or Epicurean),²⁹ in which sense and meaning are self-defined and lived for, against the senselessness of all reality.

In his *The Fear of God*, Fred Berthold, Jr. expositis anxiety as a condition that draws one to God; he talks of three modes of anxiety: anxiety over finitude and death, anxiety over sin, and anxiety to be united with God. Luther’s view, he points out, was that anxiety is only an experience of those who know God, and never of the heathen, who do not know God and may die peacefully.³⁰ “True anxiety over death,” he explains “presupposes an awareness of God and of God’s righteousness; it presupposes a desire for

eternal life with God.”³¹ In itself and by itself, anxiety is mere subjectivity, the sense of absolute and infinite oblivion, the dreadful and hopeless concern about the unknown. Within the experience of divine encounter, however, as Luther may be understood, God’s self-revelation within the sinner’s heart awakens the soul to a deep sense of failure in the sight of the Holy and Just One; this admixture of guilt and dread characterizes an experience of anxiety by which means God shatters the false security and self-sufficiency of the sinner and brings him to trust in God’s grace.³² In other words, the empty ground of being, which is nothingness, is laid bare and a condition emerges in which the only answer is repose in the grace of God. This self-emptying and self-surrender is the first step of prayer, and is starkly symbolized in the experience of the altar. However, as hunger may be unknown to a man fed always in time, so may anxiety be unknown to a man in fellowship always with God.

In the Pre-Fall period, such fellowship was continuous; therefore, prayer would be unrestrained. The Fall, however, brought a discontinuity and is symbolized by the immediate experience of shame. Shame is the confused experience of false-sufficiency and self-rootlessness. The anxiety of nakedness is the inability to relate nothingness to the new sense of ego, the pride of life that springs from the autonomy of self-determination, the self-definition of good and evil; the affront of nakedness,³³ on the other end, is the negative expression of this same anxiety.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.245

²⁸ Cf. Domenic Marbaniang, *Epistemics of Divine Reality*, pp. 329-368

²⁹ Eastern philosophies provide several instances of such culturally relevant world-views. Social reliance provides an important grid for meaningful existence throughout the different cultures of the world; in modern secular cultures, however, the absence of social epistemic authority heightens the experiences of boredom, anxiety, rootlessness, and emptiness.

³⁰ Fred Berthold, Jr., *The Fear of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), pp. 37, 46

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 46

³² *Ibid*, pp.42,44

³³ This is blatant in nudism (naturism), pornography, and any shameless culture. The Jain *Digambara* sect (atheistic) regards the naked ascetics as sky-clad, and so not nude; the process of denudation, however, is gradual. Denudation is a chief mark of the religions of nature, where God is disavowed to make room for self-world. It doesn’t necessarily mean the absence of ethics; it means the absence of God as the Absolute Law-giver.

The only answer to the Fall is provided in the Atonement of Christ. This is first symbolized in the Scripture when, following their expulsion from Eden, God clothes Adam and Eve with tunics of animal skins, implying the first shedding of blood on the earth. The skins gave them a new identity of such whose shame of sin was removed and covered³⁴ by the virtue of an animal's shedding of blood. They, in a sense, wore the animal and were exposed to one another by the virtue of it; the naked sinful condition was hidden. Here was the first copy of God's eternal altar in heaven.³⁵ Before the Fall, the altar is unseen, since the Law is unseen where sin is absent (though the principles of righteousness are eternal); for, the Law is only given for the unrighteous (1Tim.1:9) as locks are made only against thieves. After the Fall, the altar is visible as the condition of all possibility of divine favor. One can only go to the Father through it; there is no bypass. The altar and worship are inseparably tied throughout the Old Testament. Blood and fire pave the way for the Holiest; in Christ, the veil is torn open in the flesh of Jesus Christ. And, since He is our High Priest, we have bold access to the Throne of grace to obtain mercy (forgiveness and acceptance by His propitiation) and find grace to help in time of need (answer to prayers in Christ, Heb.4:14-16).

Yet, the access is not cheap. Of course, the price has been paid by the death of Jesus Christ. However, the objective aspect is only realized through the subjective participation in the same. No prayer grounded on personal

righteousness is acceptable before God. Prayer is not claiming of rights; it is seeking God "to obtain mercy and find grace". But mercy presupposes, first, in us the inward working of the "washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit.3:5), that follows a sincere, broken, and repentant heart. Jesus expounds this through the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14. The Pharisee, as is known, approached on grounds of his own self-righteous works and was not accepted; whereas, the Tax Collector humbled himself and pleaded for mercy and so was accepted, the acceptance being categorized by the word "justified", meaning "reckoned as righteous" before God. Similarly, the problem of Cain didn't rest in the offering, as some have misconstrued the fruit of the ground as being

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cursed offering; the problem was in his attitude as reflected in his anger on not being accepted. His vehemence indicated his false sense of right-to-acceptance before God; therefore, he was rejected. For, the sense of right-to-

acceptance has foundations in the gall of iniquity and wickedness that presumes not only the autonomy of the self but also the self-sufficiency of it. All sense of self-pity, self-virtue, meritorious history, and individuality is a blockade before God. The realization of nothingness and total depravity is the precursor of any intelligent worship. God cannot be sought nor worshipped in spirit and truth until the seeker is deprived of his personal worth. Apart from God, worth is a meaningless and empty aggrandizement.

³⁴ The Hebrew word for atonement is *kaphar* and means "to cover".

³⁵ The Book of Revelation seven times mentions the altar of God in heaven (Rev. 6:9; 8:3,5; 9:13;14:18; 16:7).

Brokenness at the altar provides a very clear illustration of the sense of prayer. Brokenness not only symbolizes self-emptying, as when the woman with the alabaster box broke it open to empty the ointment of spikenard on Jesus' head (Mk.14:3); it also symbolizes

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death to self in order to be alive to God (cf. Eccl.12:6)³⁶. Brokenness is not the virtue of man; it is the work of the Holy Spirit, as the Scripture also speaks figuratively, "thou hast wounded my heart, with one of thine eyes" (Song 4:9, Tyndale)³⁷. One is not subjectively drawn to God; one is pulled or, say, yanked into His arms by the drawing, convicting, awakening, and reviving action of the Spirit. Unless that happens, the soul is at the road's end with the Lord. It is He who calls us out of our blocked and hard nothingness into the fellowship of His Infinite Spirit. His breaks forth as light into our dark and zeroed

³⁶ The Hebrew word used for "broken" in Psalm 51:17 and in Ecclesiastes 12:6 (broken pitcher) is *shabar* and literally means "to burst". In Ecclesiastes 12, the reference is to death.

³⁷ It is the only time in the KJV that the Hebrew word *labab* is translated as "ravished my heart" twice in this verse. Young translates it as "emboldened me", probably from the sense of "gave heart", i.e., courage (see Keil & Delitzsch). It may perhaps be also phrased as "you got my heart" or "you won my heart". But, the undergirding thought is that the general and sullen flow of consciousness is suddenly broken, as if brought to life, by the invasion of this new sight or understanding. It is superbly expressed in the title of C. S. Lewis' autobiography, "Surprised by Joy".

consciousness, dividing the soul from the spirit, purifying the conscience, and transfer us into the Kingdom of Light by the awesome strength of His presence, as it says "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Cor.4:4). Without such invasion, there can be no prayer in the Spirit. Without such work of grace, of drawing, provoking, and enlivening, there can be no desire for the Throne of Grace. It is by the virtue of the altar of Christ that the Spirit draws one into His fellowship; and when He does, grace reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom.5:21). Therefore, it says that faith is the gift of God (Eph.2:8). Consequently, the unbeliever cannot pray; since faith precedes approach (Heb.11:6), and the only first act of prayer is faith breaking the sinner into repentance, nothingness, and total reliance on the Lord.

The Closet

"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Mat.6:6).

The closet is the moment when the doors are shut on the world. It is when the soul, a prey of this wilderness, is snatched out of the vile world into the inner place of God. The closet is the Holiest.

The closet speaks of at least three important distinctives of Biblical prayer: *individuality, privacy, intimacy*.

Individuality

One distinctive teaching of the Bible is that God is interested in people individually. The three parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin,

and Lost Son in Luke 15 are some of the best examples of this. The importance is captured in the words: "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (Lk.15:7). The New Testament concept of the Church as a Body made up of individual members illustrates the significance and role of each believing individual. More practically, the gift of tongues and the encouragement for exercise of this gift in personal prayer (1Cor.14) demonstrates the extant of the Spirit's concern for the individual in the closet. Romans 8:26 talks about the Spirit Himself making intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. Thus, the individual is brought into a spiritual relationship with the Lord through the Spirit in the moment of prayer. For, while the world is obstructed and excluded, the individual, yet retaining his/her personal identity, is one in Spirit with the Lord (1Cor. 6:17). Unless this happens, the body is not laid on the altar of sacrifice and communion is blocked.

The individual is both a unit and a fragment. The fragments are the pieces of memory within the spectra of consciousness that form the content of understanding or misunderstanding, the body drives and sensations, feelings, and character. The unit is the soul. In the closet (not necessarily a physical one), the soul breaks open into the ocean of the Spirit, the incense mingles with the fire of the altar and rises as prayer before the presence of God. Thus, prayer in the Spirit defragments the soul, dissolving the ego and its diverse and selfish interpretations; for, the Spirit of grace takes over the broken individual and unites him/her with the will of God. This is done by the Word of God, which is the Sword of the Spirit, that pierces asunder the soul from the spirit and lays open

the thoughts and intentions of the heart before the Throne of Grace. Therefore, prayer and revelation go together as prayer and faith go together. The individual, in exclusivity, can only experience purging, cleansing, and vision in the closet.

Privacy

Jesus draws an important contrast between the formal religionist and the disciple when He teaches them to go into the closet rather than praying loud in the public squares. The rationale is that prayer prayed in the public is rated as misdirected in the sight of God. The public, rather, than God is the focus. However, it is still possible that one prays in public, and still this prayer is characterized as the prayer of the closet. Therefore, the closet

is to be defined as a man with His God in seclusion. In this sense, it is not impossible to take verbatim the injunction "Pray without ceasing"; for, the one who has been in the Presence can never be at peace for even a moment with the dry world. The only way this one relates to the world is through the Presence, through the Pillar of Cloud, the Pillar of Fire.

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The Greek word *kriptos* used for "secret" in Matthew 6:6, essentially means "hidden", "concealed", or "private". It is the same word from which the words "cryptic" and "encryption" are derived. The word signifies a phenomenon that is hidden and concealed from the eyes of the world. It is neither general nor common. The Lord did teach us the Common Prayer, but the *kriptos* is that which is exclusively only between the Father and the child. It is cryptic to the world. The same also holds true regarding the *kriptos* of charity. The encryption is so secure that it is described in the metaphor of the left hand

not knowing what the right hand is doing. One might remember the sighs of Hannah which Eli was suspicious of, the heartcry of Jeremiah that the religious world despised, the vehement cries and tears of our Lord, and the glory of what the New Testament calls praying with the Spirit. The last one is described by Paul in these words, beautifully rendered by the NKJV, "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries" (1Cor.14:2). Paul explains this: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful" (1Cor.14:14). Both tongues and sighs or groanings of the Spirit are so intensely personal that the Bible says that this is only possible through the ministration of the Spirit who alone knows the innermost fragments of the thoughts of the human heart and intercedes by coming alongside (*parakletos*); thus, helping us in our weaknesses. Therefore, praying in tongues is a recurrent sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. If not in prayer, then where would lie the strength of the connection between the spiritual world of God and the natural world of man? For, even the reception of faith breaks the soul on the altar of God. However, the *kriptos* is not just the gift of tongues that is unfruitful to the understanding. This along with the prayer in the Spirit with the understanding is essential to the communication thread that defines the closet. Still, more importantly however, the *kriptos* is the fruit of a relationship that is grounded in the eternal love of God.

Intimacy

Intimacy with God has no parallel or rival in all of human experience. Therefore, the Scripture prescribes the first command to be "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." Anyone who violates this principle of intimacy has no entry into

the presence of God. Any such violation is sin and prayer mingled with sin is abominable in the sight of God (Isa.1:15; 59:2; Jer.11:14; Mic.3:4). Therefore, the Scriptures prescribe prayer to only be in accordance with the will of God. Love as the fruit of the Spirit transcends all other forms of love (even that between spouses) in the world. It is incomparable and a shock to the conscience of this selfish world. In its primary function, however, it can only be known in one's intimacy with God.

This is fourfold, ruling the heart, the soul, the mind, and the strength that correspond to the four cardinal virtues, *viz.*, fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance. Fortitude of heart is the confidence and boldness of faith that is reverent but not horripilated, hopeful but not presumptuous, heroic but not ambitious. Justice in the soul is the rightness and balance of being by which the individual entity is seen to be in right standing with God and His world. Prudence is the ability of the mind to discern the right from the wrong and act in conformity to divine intentions. Temperance is the strength of control, the capacity to hold the self from exploding under pressure of the negative, the power to resist temptation. Therefore, the love of God is unlike the love described by devotionalists such as Ramakrishna, who said that the two characteristics of Love (*Prema*) are, first, forgetfulness of the external world, and second, forgetfulness of one's own body. He went on to explain this saying, "A true devotee who has drunk deep of Divine Love is like a veritable drunkard and as such cannot always observe the rules of propriety."³⁸ This is what he also had called the madness of love; which, as we may see, almost reduces the mystic devotee to forgetfulness of the purpose or mission of life in this world as well. Madness of love may fit well in the scheme of Bhakti cosmology, where the

³⁸ *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994), pp.142,146

individual is seen as fulfilled in the enjoyment of God; but, such is alien to the Biblical concept of God, man, world, and missions.

Prayer is man's foretaste of heaven. It is the experience of the Age to come that God destined for man before the creation of the world.

Intimacy with God does not obstruct relationship with people. Therefore, the second commandment promptly follows, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which immediately implies that one is not forgetful of oneself as well – for, as Cecil Osborne had once said, one cannot love his neighbor unless he has learnt to love himself in the first place. This strikes the balance between the extremities of asceticism and hedonism, for sure; but, also, between madness and alienation.

Intimacy is communion. This is only possible through the Spirit of sonship that relates us to God in a Father-son relationship, by whom we also burst out (Gk. *krazo*) "Abba, Father!" (Gal.4:6; Rom.8:15). Intimacy is simplicity. One comes before God with a child-like confidence fearing no evil, but believing that whatever one asks in prayer one gets it from the Father who withholds no good thing from His children (Lk.11:9-13; Ps.84:11). However, if the Father-son relationship was just limited to asking and getting, then the relation would be reduced to utilitarianism, and would not be rational; therefore, not intimate. Communion is a continuous relationship. One doesn't come to God in prayer. One lives a life of prayer, walking in communion with God. One doesn't come to God to just tell his needs; one's ears and heart are always open and sensitive to the voice of the Spirit. One draws the closet: he is no longer busy in other things; his times are in God's hands (Ps.31:15).

Intimacy with God plunges depths in

communion with the Lord our Savior; for, it is in Christ that we meet God; it is in Christ that the sinner experiences sympathy, passion, love, and forgiveness. It is in the Savior that the disciple experiences cleansing and eternal life. In the One in which dwells the fullness of Godhead in bodily form, the Man Jesus Christ, the True God and eternal life (Col.2:9; 1Jn.5:20), God reaches down to man. In Him alone intimacy is possibilized, for He sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb.4:15). Therefore, He calls man to come to Him and take His yoke on his shoulder and learn from Him as a new bull learns to walk by yoking together with an older and experienced one. So, the Scripture says that this intimacy of walk in the Spirit produces in us the resemblance of our Master, as we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory (2Cor.3:18). It is difficult to be with God and not reflect His glory.

Conclusion

Prayer is man's foretaste of heaven. It is the experience of the Age to come that God destined for man before the creation of the world. It is where man encounters God through Christ, the Bridge; where man is accepted by God through Christ, at the altar; where man communes with God through the Spirit, in the closet. Without Christ, man is bankrupt of any rationale for approaching God. Paradoxically, yet, it is this bankruptcy of spirit at the altar that draws one into the shadows of His grace. And, in this yearning and burning for the Holy One, one experiences the blessedness of an encounter that can only be categorized as the ineffable, the closet.

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Prayer in the Two Covenants

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Recently I was sitting at a lunch table at the Airport in Paris, enjoying a cup of hot tea while waiting for my next flight. As I looked across the airport waiting room, I noticed a man standing near a pillar in the center of the waiting room who, like me, was waiting for his next flight.

I noticed him because at first it looked like he was putting on a sweatshirt, or he seemed to be wrapping himself in a blanket. As he adjusted the garment, I saw that it was a Jewish Prayer Shawl and that he also had a Jewish skull cap (*kipot*) on his head. Then he tied a black box on his forehead and wrapped black strips of leather around his right arm and hand. Then he began to rock back and forth as he read from his Prayer Book – right there in the middle of the day in the Airport. I watched with interest.

When he was finished with his prayer ceremony, I joined Dr. Matthew Thomas, President of CITS, and his wife, who were also travelling and waiting with me. They also had seen the man and were engaging this Jewish man in conversation about his prayer routine and customs. The man was very gracious and anxious to share with us the

details of his prayer attire and the meaning connected with the prayer ritual of the Old Covenant.

He explained that the Prayer Shawl was a covering to shut out the world while he prayed, so concentration to the prayer could be given. The box strapped to his forehead contained Holy Scriptures inside, so to keep near to his mind. The straps of leather were wrapped around his arm to his shoulder to point to the heart and they bound his hands to the immediate task of prayer. He showed us the fringes with knots tied in them on the corner of the prayer shawl and then also showed us how strings with knots tied in them were also attached to his clothing under his shirt so they were always with him, not only when engaged in formal prayer times. He was obviously an Orthodox Jew and carried on the traditions from ancient times. Interestingly, he fervently spoke of the meaning and significance of each ritual, as well as the heart preparation for his prayer life. I was impressed with his sincerity. The detail, ritualism, formality, and antiquity of his faith reflected the Old Covenant, dated back to Moses and the Law of the Pentateuch, adding the traditions of the centuries, together with the teaching of the Talmud.

Immediately, my mind went to the New Covenant with the teachings and